

# Eight Ergonomic Essentials

By Nancy M. Lowe, MPT, CHT, CAE

To keep yourself comfortable, safe, and efficient every day, in the home as well as the office, remember these bits of essential ergonomics advice:

**1. Move frequently.** I don't know which ergonomics sage said it first, but he or she put it well after being asked, "*What is the best working position?*" The answer was: "*The best position is the next position.*" Movement is essential for good circulation and breathing as well as nerve, joint, and muscle function. I advise you to change tasks or positions, or use a mini stretch-and-breathe break every 20-30 minutes. You can even shift positions or stretch now as you read. Frequent movement can invigorate you and keep you from feeling sluggish as you go through your day.

**2. Rest frequently.** Rest, paradoxically, is closely related to movement from an ergonomics perspective. At times movement allows for rest. You must move in order to rest muscles that have been holding you in a sustained posture. For example, after a time of pulling weeds or sitting at a computer in a bent position, you must get up and straighten your back to give it a break from the sustained posture. Of course, there are also times when you must rest by not moving. Muscles and joints that have been moving too much, too forcefully, or for too long need time to relax. Doing a completely different task or taking a restful break can help you accomplish this. Getting enough sleep is also essential to sustain the body and mind.

**3. Use proper postures.** It is important to work and rest with your spine in good alignment and maintain its normal curves. Additionally, keep the shoulders relaxed and the wrists in neutral positions whenever possible, and protect the hips and knees from prolonged and repetitive bending. Learn to lift and move such that your stance is stable and your power comes from the strong leg muscles rather than the vulnerable spinal muscles. When you bend forward while sitting, bend from the hips (hip-hinging) without rounding the back.

**4. Keep an eye on vision.** Your head and posture adjust to where you're looking, so make sure the things you look at most are placed at or just below eye level and in front of you at a comfortable viewing distance. If you're also handling the items you're looking at, place them low and supported within easy reach. Angle or orient them toward you to allow for a balance between neutral neck posture and comfortable arm posture. (See the photo to the right for an example.) Making things easy on your eyes can make them easier on your body as well.



For optimal alignment and comfort, angle your paper-work up and toward you.

*Photo courtesy of Lorin Baeta*

**5. Organize by reach zone.** Avoid awkward postures by placing the things you use most in your *near reach zone*, where you can get to them readily. When using the computer, the keyboard and mouse should be the objects closest to you. At the work bench, place your immediate task in the near reach zone and frequently-used tools in easy-to-reach locations. *Mid-reach* and *far-reach* zones are for items you use occasionally or rarely. Stand up or move closer to get to items in the far reach zone. Institute a *walking zone* if you wish, to encourage yourself to get up and move, walking to your printer or other devices or equipment.

**6. Use the right tool for the task.** Select the right tool for the job you're doing and never, ever, use your hand as an impact tool. The correct tool should be designed for the task, in good condition, comfortable and secure to grasp, and enable you to perform the task with your wrist relatively straight. Use your tools properly, avoiding excessive force and repetition.

**7. Don't be afraid to ask for help.** Too many injuries occur because of people not asking for help when they should. If you are considering lifting an object that is heavy or awkward, or doing some other task that seems risky; if you have a concern about your work area; or if you've developed a symptom that isn't going away; your silence won't help the situation. Take the time, and care for yourself by asking for help before you're beyond help.

**8. Listen to your sensible self.** Here is the most important tool in your arsenal: *Yourself*. Use your awareness and good judgment to assess whether your environment and your work practices are in your best interests. Did your waiter place your plate off to one side, causing you to bend to the side to eat? Why not move the plate? Are you carefully typing with your wrists in neutral positions, but then writing on an inappropriate-height surface and straining your wrist and forearm? Did you leave the monitor exactly where it was when you moved into this office five years ago, or did you adjust it for height, distance, and alignment? Did someone sit in your chair and leave it too high or angled improperly for you? Did you drive someone's car without adjusting the mirrors and seat? Every day and everywhere you go, look, notice, and think about ways to care for yourself. Avoid these common risk factors: awkward positions, excessive forces, sustained postures, and repetitive motions.

Take a tour of your home and work environments – your office, kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, garage, garden, car, and other areas. Look for ways to make your life more comfortable and efficient by keeping in mind the eight ergonomics essentials.

Nancy M. Lowe is a Certified Ergonomist, Registered Physical Therapist and Certified Hand Therapist with over 20 years of experience treating and preventing injuries. For more ergonomics information visit <a href="http://www.pacificcoastergo.com">http://www.pacificcoastergo.com</a>
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